

MOTHMAN AND NARRATIVE HIJACKING

By Jack Daly

WHO KNOWS WHAT FOLKLORE IS?

- Folk: people
- Lore: stories
- “Artistic communication in small groups” Ben-Amos
- “Informal, traditional culture” McNeill
- Folklorists focus on variation and tradition

WHO KNOWS WHAT MOTHMAN IS?

- Mothman: a cryptid creature that was sighted in Point Pleasant, West Virginia between 1966 and 1967
- 200 sightings



MOTHMAN

A cryptid creature that was sighted in Point Pleasant, West Virginia between 1966 and 1967

Bipedal winged humanoid

Black, gray, dark brown

7 feet tall, wing span 10-15 feet

Ability to fly 100 MPH

Red eyes said to incite feelings of dread and pure evil

Hypnotic, telepathic powers

Omen of death

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oVzp5S8m6bY>



SILVER BRIDGE COLLAPSE

December 15, 1967

Bridge connecting Point Pleasant,
WV and Gallipolis, Ohio

13 months after Mothman
sightings began, eye-bar 13 broke

38 people died, deadliest bridge
collapse in U.S. history

People say they saw Mothman on
bridge

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HDA3lRr9Uxo>

FOLKLORIZATION AND COMMEMORATION

- Americo Paredes: showed how the actual events surrounding Jose Mosqueda were folklorized in corridos
- Folklorization: the processing of local artistic production into mediated displays of folklore
- John McDowell: showed how the actual events surrounding Chante Luna were commemorated in folklore
- Commemoration: serves a specific function

MY ARGUMENT

- The ways in which the events surrounding the Silver Bridge collapse have been commemorated and folklorized have resulted in what I term a “narrative hijacking,” in that the popularity of Mothman has overshadowed the actual events of the bridge collapse.
- Some focus on the disaster and use it as a way to mourn while others focus on Mothman and are driven by an economic incentive, yet each have a commercial dimension.
- We’ll look at songs, literature, material culture and film to see how this is the case

NARRATIVE HIJACKING

- When the story is really about one thing, but a different aspect becomes the focus
- In this case, Silver Bridge collapse should be the focus, but Mothman became it
- Reasons for hijacking are typically commercial or ideologically driven

NARRATIVE HIJACKING EXAMPLES

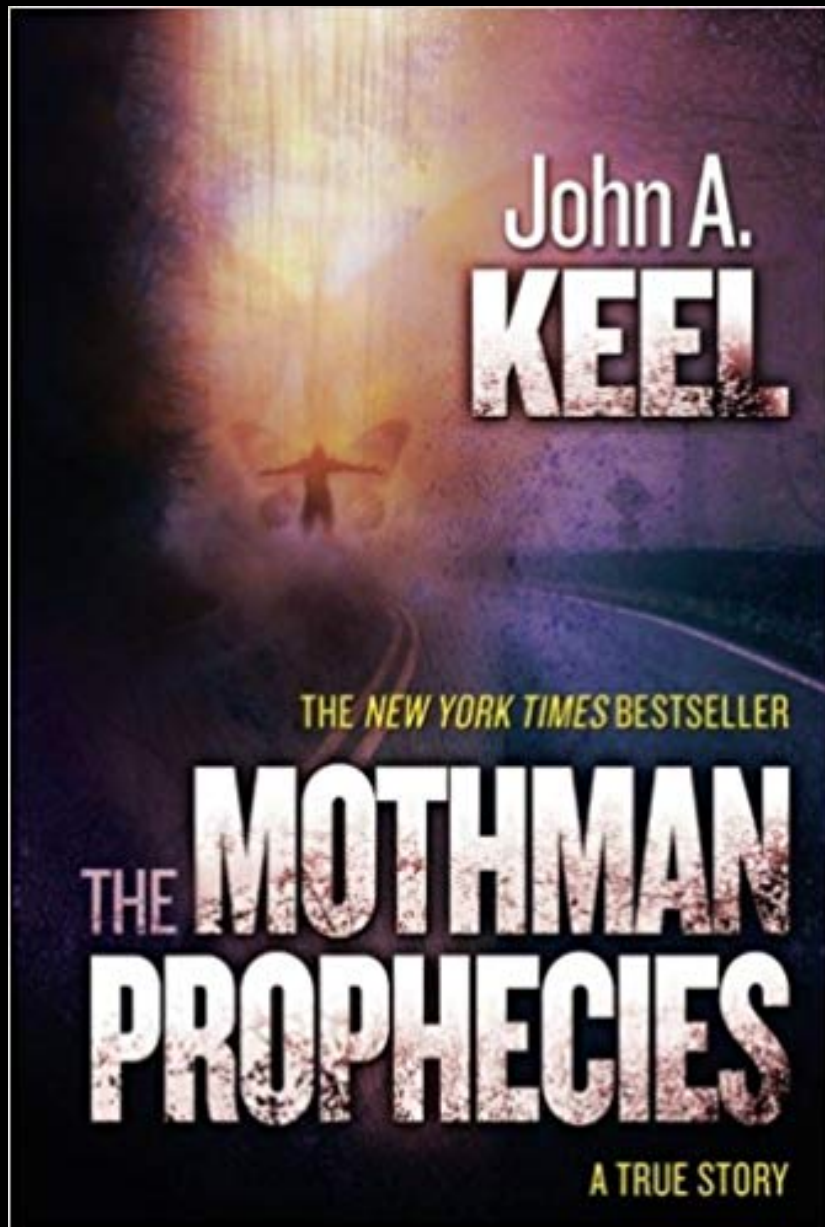
- Has a wide range of applications
- For folklore, it could be used for many supernatural occurrences
 - Salem
 - St. Ann's Retreat

INVASIVE NARRATIVE

- Jeannie Thomas – not a story that locals live by, rather a story locals live with
- Certainly the case with Mothman
- Difference: Mothman is not just the locals, also extends to national level
- Could be argued this is the case with Salem as well

MOTHMAN SONGS

- There have been several songs made about Mothman and the Silver Bridge collapse
- The songs that focus on the bridge collapse don't mention Mothman
- The songs that focus on Mothman are incentivized by financial gain
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ccvpiju_Q20
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SrvYVbrEGbM>



THE MOTHPHMAN PROPHECIES

Published in 1975 by John Keel

John Keel – Fortean

Coined the term “Men-in-Black”

Went to Point Pleasant to investigate Mothman, found that it was much more than that

UFOs, animal mutilations, MIBs, strange phone calls, precognition, unexplained physical ailments

KEEL'S THEORIES

- Drew on Tibetan concept of Tulpa: that human minds can manipulate invisible energies into visible forms called Tulpas
- “Hallucinations, psychological constructs, momentary materializations of energy from that dimension beyond the reach of our senses and even beyond the reaches of our scientific instruments.”
- Keel – today we no longer are obsessed with direct visits with God, instead we have constructed a mythology focused on aliens constructed in our own image

CONTINUED


- Ultraterrestrials – “beings and forces which coexist with us but are on another time frame; that is, they operate outside the limits of our space-time continuum yet have the ability to cross over into our reality.”
- Similarly, “the flying saucer/extraterrestrial visitants are not real in the sense that a 747 airliner is real. They are transmogrifications of energy under the control of some unknown extradimensional intelligence.”

KEEL'S PERSPECTIVE

- Brought his own lens into the situation
- His book more about UFOs than Mothman
- The creature was called “the bird” until “Mothman” was coined by the media
- Made the bridge collapse about Mothman
- Capitalized on Mothman's popularity

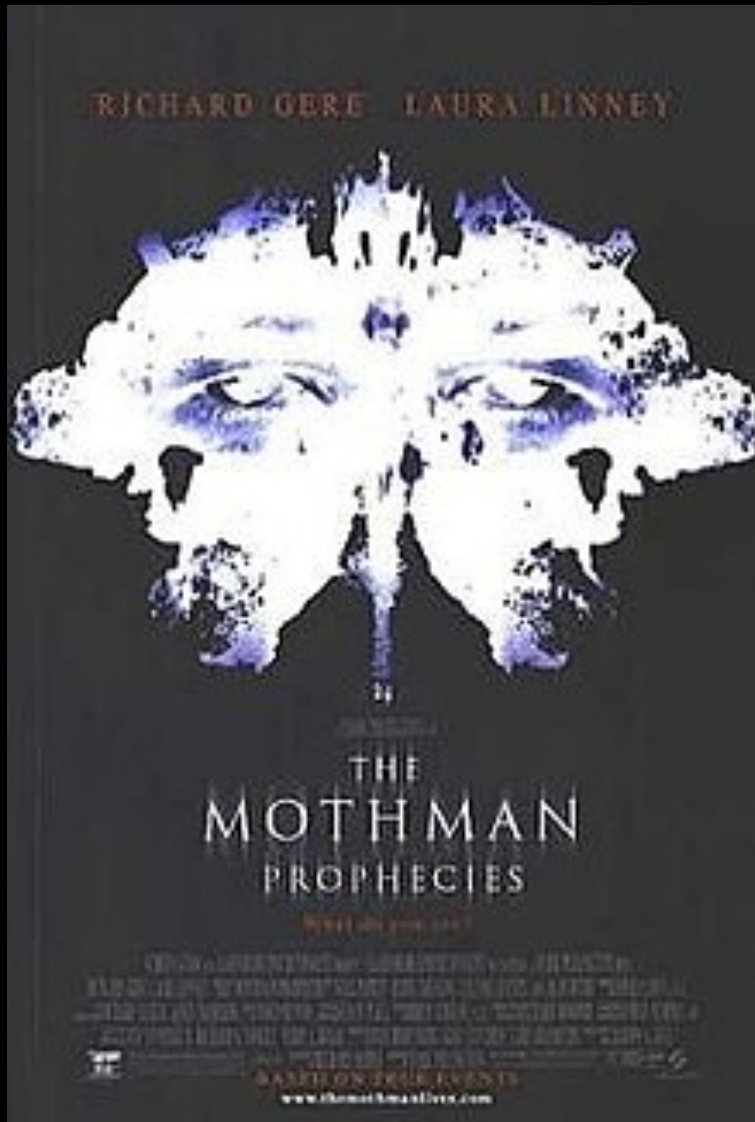
COMMEMORATION: POINT PLEASANT

- After the Silver Bridge collapsed, Point Pleasant experienced economic disaster
- In recent years, efforts have been made to boost tourism
- Museum with Silver Bridge exhibit
- A historical marker has been erected to commemorate the Silver Bridge

A stone monument with a plaque commemorating the Silver Bridge collapse. The monument is made of light-colored stone and is surrounded by green and reddish-brown foliage. The plaque is dark with white text.

Site of the Silver Bridge
Collapsed December 15, 1967
46 Lives Lost

Erected by Colonel Charles Lewis Chapter, NSDAR



THE MOTHMAN PROPHECIES MOVIE

2002

Stars Richard Gere as John Keel
(called John Klein in the movie)

Movie sparked renewed interest
in Mothman

It was after the movie that local
business owners

Further commodification of
legend, marginalization of the folk



MOTHMAN FESTIVAL

2020 festival will be the 19th
annual

Jeff Wamsley – organized festival,
made a museum, made Mothman
bus tour

Live music, vendors, guest
speakers

Local residents “roll their eyes”

Example of geographic tourism



MOTHMAN STATUE

Local Charles Humphries got a local artist to make the Mothman statue

Main Street Point Pleasant organization commissioned it

Drew TV stations to town

Humphries: “I had people wanting to run me off! I still have people that hate the Mothman here in town.”

CONCLUSIONS

- The folklorization and commemoration of Mothman and the Silver Bridge collapse differed based on financial incentive
- The way a historical event becomes folklore is not a strict transition from event to folklore but rather a folklorization
- Interactions with Mothman indicates how the commodification of belief and legend shapes interactions within and without communities